Kokua Hawaii Oral History Project Interview with
John Witeck

John Witeck
Photo courtesy of the Witeck family

John Witeck, born in 1945 in Washington, D.C., was a founder of Students for a Democratic Society at the University of Hawaii-Manoa in the late 1960s, a national student activist group known for its opposition to the Vietnam War. He also was a part of the activist community that supported the anti-eviction struggle in Kalama Valley. Witeck was a founder of Youth Action and later a founder and executive director of the nonprofit Hawaii People's Fund, providing grants and supporting the application for grants to various groups seeking social change. In 1972 he started working for the United Public Workers and was employed there (despite two firings) until 1998 —for 26 years total— where he worked as an editor of the union newspaper, a union representative, and the Assistant Oahu Division Director. He continues to work as a part-time instructor/lecturer at Honolulu Community College. He was interviewed by Gary T. Kubota at his home in Kalihi on October 7, 2016.

GK: Good morning, John. Tell me about your parents?

JW: My father started his career as a teacher in Wisconsin. He taught in a Catholic school with class from first through eighth grade. He eventually moved to Washington, D.C. from Wisconsin and took up a job with the Commerce Department, so he was a government worker. My mother did the same thing from Kansas. They met in Washington, DC. She converted to Catholicism to marry my father. My father later earned a law degree. I don't think he practiced law. Eventually, he worked for the Senate Appropriations Committee.

GK: Some people might think that Virginia is very conservative? It's the home state of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee.

JW: We lived in Arlington, which had government people there. It was sort of a different type of Virginia. My father was more a progressive labor Democrat. He was always a Democrat farmer/labor supporter. It was a part of the history of Wisconsin. You had the people from Norway and Sweden, et cetera who settled there. . . who had some very progressive AFL, IWW labor politics. I think he was Bohemian German; he was second

generation and knew some German. My mother was Scotch-Irish and related to people like the Byrds.

GK: The explorer or the senator?

JW: Oh, both. They're both related.

GK: Did you come from a large family?

JW: I was the second oldest of seven children—two brothers and four sisters.

GK: Did you go to public schools?

JW: I went to a Catholic school. Sisters of Notre Dame. They had some lady teachers but it was all white. Arlington was mainly white, and Washington, D.C. was 90 percent African American. The whites would go and take the good jobs, the government jobs. The African Americans from Southern Virginia or Maryland or from the district would come to the suburbs, the white suburbs, to work as maids or in other jobs. If you took a bus going into Washington, you'd see the African Americans in buses going the other way.

GK: When you were going to high school, did you have to work?

JW: I was a newspaper boy in Arlington for probably five or six years.

In the summer, because of my father's Senate Appropriations Committee job, I could get summer jobs with various government departments. So, for a couple of years, I worked for the U.S. Senate in the warehouse.

GK: What did you think about the atmosphere of your upbringing?

JW: By the time I got to University of Virginia, the civil rights movement was beginning. Virginia schools were still segregated until the late sixties. Martin Luther King Jr. and a few other ministers made me reflect back on what I grew up in.

GK: Please explain what brought you to Hawaii?

JW: At the University of Virginia, I had done my final paper for a bachelor's degree about the Chinese student movement of 1919 and 1925, but I had never met a Chinese person, and, so, when I worked summers at the U.S. State Department, I learned about a program in Hawaii called the East-West Center. I applied and got accepted. I wanted to study Chinese language and Asian studies.

GK: How did that help you to get here?

JW: The scholarship paid for the room, travel and tuition. I stayed at the university's

Hale Manoa. I started summer school learning Chinese language. I was working toward a master's degree in Asian History.

GK: What year was that?

JW: This would have been 1967. I did the first summer intensive Chinese every day three to six hours a day, and then, of course, I met Asian students at the East-West Center, met Chinese from Taiwan and Filipinos, but not People's Republic Of China Chinese from mainland China. I met other Asians as well—Thais, Vietnamese.

GK: What kind of degree did you have at that time?

JW: I had a bachelor's degree with high honors in Government and Foreign Affairs from the University of Virginia.

GK: How did you get involved in activism?

JW: When I got to the East-West Center, the university had a controversy involving Noel Kent protesting President Lyndon Johnson's visit, and there were East-West Center students who had raised some issues or challenged the Vietnam War. . . Because of my State Department experience, I learned things about the war that made me oppose it.

I was active in the Newman Association on the mainland, a Catholic student group. I thought I would form a Newman Club here. But then I decided to cut to the quick and form a Students for Democratic Society chapter.

GK: What happened?

JW: We handed out fliers for the meeting. We had a meeting at a first floor classroom in Webster Hall. I was surprised. We had more than 80 people. It was overflowing.

GK: Wow.

JW: I remember at the first meeting, I was made president. The students couldn't decide on their position—Was the war in Vietnam a mistake? (chuckles) Was it a result of the capitalist system? We would have debates, and finally, we began holding protests against military recruiters, CIA recruiters coming on campus. And then, we organized around the Oliver Lee case (an anti-Vietnam War teacher who was being denied tenure).

GK: What happened?

JW: We did a sit-in at the university administration building for about 11 days in May. It went quite a while, and I lost my East-West Center grant. They wouldn't even pay for my way back to Virginia. So my parents sent me money. I got pretty much locked out of my dorm room.

GK: Locked out?

JW: I couldn't keep up with my studies. . . There were five graduate courses. At the same time, I sort of lost interest somewhat in the degree. The only recruitment bulletin notices for graduate students in Asian Studies were from the CIA. I didn't take the exams because we were doing a sit-in (laughter) and I met (my future wife) Lucy there.

GK: Only CIA? That's kind of a sobering job-listing reality.

JW: My real interest in Asian studies was student movements. . . Rather than studying about them, I got involved in being part of one and founding one.

GK: That's quite a turn of events?

JW: My activism in Hawaii really influenced my life after that. I had met Lucy through my anti-war draft resistance and draft card burning.

GK: So, you burned your draft card too?

JW: I burned it at least a few times. I went home after I lost my grant. . . and I came back to Hawaii after being drafted.

GK: How did that happen?

JW: I got drafted because I would write my draft board and tell them I no longer wanted a student deferment. That was because so many non-college students were getting drafted from Hawaii especially from Waianae, Kalihi, and Waipahu, and we had a high casualty rate in Hawaii. So, I just felt having a deferment was really a way of avoiding and not taking a stand. So, I burned my draft card, I wrote my draft board, they made me I-A.

GK: What happened?

JW: I was ordered to be drafted in 1968 and to be inducted at Fort DeRussy on Oahu. I refused the induction.

GK: What happened after that?

JW: I was indicted, and I had to face federal trial.

GK: Wow.

JW: I was acquitted. The charges were thrown out because there was a U.S. Supreme Court ruling in a case that when a person burns a draft card, a draft board cannot subject him to the draft. So the court ruled that the draft was not meant to be an instrument of punishment for burning a draft card. There were other criminal penalties that could have

been applied. . . so my case was thrown out.

GK: How did your father react to your activism?

JW: I think he was more worried about the anti-war activities and draft, and the draft resistance, 'cause he worked for the federal government. He had a brother who had a defense department contract, and this brother would call him and say, "You know, your damn son could make trouble for my company because of this anti-war. . . (Laughter) Luckily, my father was not on great terms with his brother, and my mother was supportive. The brother's company made caskets, I think aluminum caskets, to bring home war dead from Vietnam.

GK: Oh.

JW: I think at first, they were thinking I was throwing away my life, throwing away an educational opportunity. They were very worried, but later in life, my mother gave me copies of letters she sent to Congressional people, to the editor of the *Honolulu Advertiser*. . . supporting me in my anti-war stances and the draft resistance. So, I think my mother actually became fairly politicized by it. Later, she supported Jesse Jackson.

GK: So, you were no longer a graduate student on scholarship but you're in Hawaii. What did you do?

JW: I was fortunate to meet people in Hawaii—church people, who had this joint strategy action committee funding available who invited me to apply for a church grant to form a youth movement or some kind of organization. So, that's how in 1969 I formed the group Youth Action which raised money to help youth projects for social change. I worked as Youth Action's $200-a-month coordinator.

GK: Who approached you to form this group?

JW: Larry Jones and the Rev. Wally Fukunaga, and a couple of other progressive people. (Jones was a Honolulu newspaper columnist, and Fukunaga was based at Off Center Coffeehouse as the campus minister for United Church of Christ.)

GK: What happened?

JW: So, we set up the office at the Church of the Crossroads. It eventually led to establishing Hawaii People's Fund, which was founded in 1971. We thought the fund was good for youth groups and would be good for other general community groups. And I'm glad that organization has lasted about 45 years now.

GK: Forty-five years?

JW: Yes, we supported draft counseling, draft resistance, community struggles, Hawaiian struggles, and actually sponsored the first Diamond Head Crater Festival in 1970.

GK: What happened then?

JW. Youth Action received money to conduct a Youth Congress. It wasn't that much money, probably $1,000. We rented one of the University of Hawaii dormitories. We invited many, about 100 youth groups.

GK: So this happened during the summer?

JW: Yeah, it was in June 1970. The news of Bishop Estate's activities in Kalama Valley reached us. Word came back to me at Youth Action. The Youth Congress had passed resolutions on sovereignty and crass development of the islands for tourism and high-priced housing, including Kalama Valley. We had people from that Congress who were willing to take action.

GK: Hmm.

JW: So a few of us went out after I got word of it. Lori Hayashi (now Treschuk), Linton Park and I went out there. I knew Lori through her anti-war work and Linton, through his draft resistance work. Linton's brother Dana was one of the early draft resisters who actually went to jail. . . On a last-minute notice, we got a call. We heard the developer was demolishing houses. . . My wife Lucy had just given birth to Matthew and stayed home. I think I picked up Lori and Linton. This would have been in July 1970.

GK: How did the valley look?

JW: It looked like fairly rough terrain, unpaved dirt roads. We saw a house toward the front of the valley, and we met Moose Lui, who was native Hawaiian, and his wife, and I think they had a grandchild.

GK: What did Moose say?

JW: He said they're starting to tear down houses and people wanted to stay. He said he was sort of the mayor of the valley. He told me he and the residents still there had no place to relocate to. We met George Santos, a pig farmer, and Black Richards and his family who ran a junkyard in the valley. All these residents said they were not going to comply with the eviction notices and wanted to resist.

We heard a bulldozer farther back in the valley and so. . . we drove to the back of the valley, and we actually saw a bulldozer near a house.

GK: What happened next?

JW: We walked up. It was a Quonset hut I believe. It had a front porch built onto it, and Linton, Lori—Lori was like seven months pregnant—and I went in and we looked around and saw that the people still had their stuff, belongings in the house. So, they obviously were just out looking for housing. The bulldozer operator brought the bulldozer fairly close and got out. . . We asked the driver what he was going to do. His name was Tiny and he said he had orders to bulldoze the house. We pointed out that it still had the residents' property inside. Ed Michaels, who was a Bishop Estate official, came up and said that we were trespassing and needed to get out, and we said no, we're not leaving.

GK: Then what happened?

JW: We went onto the porch of the house and sat down and said we would not move. Then Michaels ordered the bulldozer operator to go ahead and knock it down, and Tiny—we found later that Tiny was the name of the bulldozer equipment operator—starts driving right up to the house maybe few feet away and then he turns off the engine, and, of course, we're breathing sighs of relief and he gets out and he throws the keys out into the grass and he said if you wanna do it, you do it, and he walked away (chuckles), and Ed Michaels left, and I guess he called the police 'cause within 10 to 20 minutes, police came and we were arrested.

GK: What were your thoughts?

JW: It was surprising that Bishop Estate had already sent a bulldozer operator into the valley to demolish homes while some residents were still living in the valley and looking for relocation housing. Some houses looked empty but some clearly had residents. Bishop Estate, a large landowner allegedly with the mission of helping Hawaiian keiki have educational opportunities, was rushing to evict Hawaiians like Moose Lui and Black Richards and their families and other local people, pig-raisers, and farmers like George Santos.

GK: How did this incident influence you?

JW: The incident with the bulldozer and Ed Michaels' attitude and arrogance made us more determined to organize opposition to the evictions and so we alerted our movement friends like John Kelly (Save Our Surf founder), Sam Lono (kahuna lapaau), and Youth Congress delegates like Kalani Ohelo. Also, our arrest further convinced us to continue and build the struggle. Over the next few days, others went to Kalama Valley to support residents and oppose the evictions and there were other arrests; Linton Park got arrested a second time. This struggle became the pioneer struggle in a long series of ensuing land struggles against rapacious, profit-driven development that caused evictions of Hawaiian and other local families. I became a strong supporter of Hawaiian land struggles, and Youth Action and People's Fund, two organizations I founded, also devoted resources to such struggles and efforts, including the sovereignty movement. Kokua Kalama, and later Kokua Hawaii which developed from this struggle, became a major movement organization throughout the islands and influenced subsequent struggles on Kauai,

in Waipahu, Waimanalo, Waiahole-Waikane, and Chinatown, and in Kona—and the forming of alliances among these groups, and the large "End All Evictions" demonstration in Honolulu. When the police ended the Kalama Valley occupation with a massive assault in 1971, a few dozen folks were arrested.

GK: How was news coverage? Were there a lot of Hawaiians protesting at that time?

JW: There was really nothing that was covered in the news or very visible. At the university, students hardly saw any Hawaiian students. I'm sure there were some. Among the workforce, some of the janitors were Hawaiian, but very few faculty members. You had to go out into the community to meet the indigenous people of the islands. Fortunately, before I came from Virginia, I did some reading and found out that Liliuokalani had been overthrown and that the U.S. merchants and plantation owners had overthrown the government. And pretty much established martial law, and that Hawaii was annexed to the U.S. without really much say from the indigenous or other people who lived there.

GK: After the Kalama arrest, how did people treat you?

JW: My friends and family were very supportive, and I felt the occupation of the valley had broad support and that Bishop Estate had won a "pyrrhic victory" in that the long-term costs to its reputation would be great and the example provided by the resisters and Kokua Hawaii would rebound and take root in other communities—which did in fact happen. I could be proud of my part in the Kalama Valley struggle. Lucy became an active member of Kokua Hawaii, a cadre organization.

GK: Right.

JW: My feeling about myself was I was a guest of this people who had lost so much. You hardly heard Hawaiian spoken. You might have some Hawaiian music. I noticed later when I worked for the union, there was a song that some of the older Hawaiians would sing or told me about, and occasionally at their union parties, they would sing it. It was. . .

GK: Was that "Kaulana Na Pua" by Queen Liliuokalani?

JW: Yes. . . That song always brings tears to my eyes because when I first heard it, the musicians playing it were crying. I was lucky. I worked in Waimanalo for the summer and helped out a Vista worker who worked there and got to know Hawaiian kids. Fortunately, I met people who did work for Vista in Waimanalo. One was a white woman Kate Stanley who was later a state representative. (Laughter) She introduced me to some families there. And on weekends away from my summer classes, I would take the bus out and visit with them and spend the weekend with them. I had some exposure to grassroots culture.

GK: What was the situation?

JW: People just felt more inadequate in a way and that they couldn't have all these things that these more wealthy people had. Hawaii was being developed for people who did not even live here. I noticed that many Hawaiian youths and many of the kids from Waimanalo ended up in Oahu prison, mainly for small crimes—stealing, sometimes fighting with haoles on their beach. The police would always pick them up. The police would pick on these Hawaiian youths even if the police were Hawaiians.

GK: Tell me about the demonstration at the state capitol in 1970?

JW: Our Youth Congress was involved. So was John Kelly and his Save Our Surf group and some residents from Waimanalo and some environmentalists and university supporters. Kokua Kalama led to the core group Kokua Hawaii and the occupation of Kalama Valley. There were maybe 1,500, up to 2,000 people at the state capitol. You had all people on all levels above the courtyard. When they stomped their feet, they shook the building.

GK: At a certain point, the steering committee of Kokua Hawaii asked the haole supporters to leave the valley? What happened?

JW: Around that time, the media was covering this Kalama Valley issue, focusing on the long-haired haoles, who would come in and support people. They were called "hippies." Some were just activists. . . Perhaps the news media bought into this myth that it must be a white person behind it because white people have controlled Hawaii for so long in Hawaii history. At one point, the Kokua Hawaii people said we need a meeting to decide, practically, whether this is good because the point of the occupation was to save local land for local people. If you have 20, 30, 40 percent of the people occupying the valley comprised of newly arrived haoles, it sort of blurred that message. So I supported the tactical separation that was decided. The haoles could support the Kalama Valley residents in other ways. We didn't have to stay in the valley or occupy the valley. It made sense and it didn't diminish their support. To me, it was self-empowering to see. Here were non-white local people, the residents and their supporters, struggling for return of land or just to protect the land from high-priced development for people who don't even live here.

There were two white people, Gene Parker and Moira Foley, who did stay in the valley and were the exceptions. Moira was a nurse, and Gene had worked with some of the Kalama Valley people for a long time. He had actually been in the valley before the Kokua Hawaii occupation and was trusted by the group.

There are other people who I know who opposed that decision and felt it was racist or divisive.

GK: What did you do?

JW: We did a lot of work in town publicizing the occupation. . . I would do a lot of work from our Church of Crossroads spreading the word. My wife Lucy got involved later.

GK: Did you get to know other residents besides Moose Lui?

JW: One of the most fascinating people in Kalama Valley besides Moose Lui was George Santos. He was a pig farmer. So, we got to know his pigs. One of the duties—I think it was nearly daily if not every day—was going to the hotels with George. He had some hotels who had put aside garbage for the farmers and so we would go with George and bring it to his farm. We'd pick up the garbage maybe around three, four or five in the morning. I remember it smelled. We'd take it there and we would help George dump it into the feeding trough.

GK: How did you feel about that?

JW: (Chuckles) I learned more about the food I ate. You know we eat food and we don't think of where it comes from or how much labor goes into producing something like the bacon I ate today. George probably couldn't afford buying pig feed, and gathering the hotel garbage really helped him to make money. You could make several hundred dollars on a pig in those days.

But the other thing I learned is you getting to know your food as a creature. Each pig had a name and. . . a personality, and they're smart. . . They're more intelligent than dogs. I don't think I could ever take them to a slaughterhouse (laughter). I think for a while I didn't wanna eat any pork (laughter) and I probably shouldn't but I'd never been really exposed to a farm or to a livestock type of place. Santos was just down to earth. He would talk to the pigs. He would train us in how to do aspects of the job. He was a great guy. I enjoyed that part of the Kalama experience.

GK: How did the struggle in Kalama change you and your beliefs?

JW: It reinforced my beliefs and strengthened the efforts my wife Lucy and I jointly undertook in support of working people and communities under attack.

GK: Many of the Kalama Valley members and Kokua Hawaii members were Hawaiian? How did that affect you?

JW: I have a deep admiration of Hawaiians among the activists and the residents—their culture, songs, food and language, and their acceptance of me, a haole. I have read a good deal on the Kanaka Maoli, and I know I was moved by Marion Kelly's essay on the alienation of land from the Hawaiian people, and also her article on South Point and the decimation of the Hawaiian population. Later, other Hawaiians such as Dr. Kekuni Blaisdell had a huge impact on me, as well as Kalani Ohelo, Pete Thompson, Haunani Trask and others.

GK: What did you gain and what did you lose as a result of participating in the Kalama Valley struggle?

JW: I mainly gained insights about the situation Hawaiians and local folks were in, the steps for organizing the resistance, lessons on handling the legal system after arrest and during trials, and developed friendships with many Hawaiian and local activists and residents. Hawaii became more of a home for my family and me.